

State Inches Ahead on Freight Rail Project

A federal agency has signed on to help determine next steps; Hanover is the least expensive of four options to develop, according to preliminary research.

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State transportation officials Tuesday called the first press conference since announcing their intention to evaluate Hanover for a large-scale freight operation in March.

Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) and CSX have been working on the project—called an intermodal transfer facility, where trains and trucks exchange cargo—since 2009 but agencies' representatives said on Nov. 15 that it now has a federal sponsor.

“...The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) will be an important part of the team,” said MDOT's Dominic Wiker, at a roundtable in the MDOT headquarters in Hanover.

The FHWA will ultimately sign off on any chosen site for the facility after MDOT and CSX identify it.

“Since trucking is half of the operation of these facilities, it's a pretty natural fit,” said Bradley Smith, project manager for MDOT. He said that FHWA has experience working with intermodal facilities around the country.

Currently, CSX and MDOT are evaluating four sites in central Maryland for the intermodal facility: Brock Bridge Road at MD 175; Montevideo Road at the Howard/Anne Arundel line; Hanover at Race Roads; and Beltsville.

Officials said that they do not anticipate any sites being eliminated at the moment.

“FHWA has officially come on board within the past month,” said Wiker, when asked whether an elimination round would be coming. “...As they evaluate the status of what [information] we've got, we'll start to understand what their next steps will be; but we don't have a timetable.”

The FHWA is reviewing environmental information that project leaders have gathered as part of a federal process called the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

“They'll be evaluating information we have collected to date...and helping us define further studies that are required for all four of the sites,” said Wiker.

“We haven’t done fieldwork yet,” added Wiker.

Smith said that what they have done is gather information from local, state and federal agencies, like county governments, the Maryland Department of the Environment, Maryland Department of Planning, Maryland Historical Trust and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency.

That information will be presented during three workshops where officials from CSX, MDOT and FHWA will be on hand to answer questions.

According to what Christopher Smith of CSX called “preliminary numbers,” the cost of developing the four sites under consideration is as follows:

- Beltsville: \$175–\$200 million
- Hanover: \$140–\$165 million
- Jessup: \$300–\$325 million
- Montevideo: \$200–\$225 million

He said that cost was one of many factors under consideration.

There is also a "no build" option, in addition to the four sites, which costs nothing.

Officials said they would have a site determined by the end of 2012, a change from earlier plans to have the site by summer 2012.

"This is a very complex intermodal project...that is going to take some time to play itself out," said Jack Cahalan, spokesperson for MDOT. "You need to have some flexibility. Whether you're dealing with the Woodrow Wilson Bridge or the ICC...there are no hard timelines for large transportation projects."

This article has been corrected at 6 p.m. on Nov. 16 to reflect that the FHWA, not the FHA, is the lead agency in the intermodal project.